



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
**EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HOUSING &
LIVABLE COMMUNITIES
COMMISSION ON INDIAN AFFAIRS**

Maura T. Healey, Governor ♦ Kimberley Driscoll, Lieutenant Governor
Edward M. Augustus, Jr., Secretary ♦ John Peters, Jr., Executive Director

**MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE
COMMISSION ON INDIAN AFFAIRS**

Monday, November 24, 2025 3:00 PM

Zoom was facilitated by Commissioner Gonzales

Commissioners Present: Rhonda Anderson, Tashanna Carter, Aaron Gonzales, Gail Hill, and Troy Phillips, Chairman, and Mike Wagner.

Staff: John “Jim” Peters, Executive Director; and Burne Stanley, Part-time Administrative Assistant.

Comm. Phillips called the meeting to order at 3:05 PM and offered a prayer. Following the prayer, a roll call of Commissioners and staff was conducted.

1. Opening

Comm. Phillips asked for a moment of silence to honor members of the community who have recently passed.

2. Suffolk Law Indigenous Peoples Clinic – Conclusions of Tribal Listening Sessions proposes Inter-tribal Gathering

Nicole Friederichs of Suffolk Law Schools’ Indigenous Peoples Clinic, provided an update on the Tribal Listening Sessions. She reported that between November 2023 and November 2024 ten sessions were held that year.

The significant common themes from the report were:

- Unity and Healing within should be the priority
- Interest in a state-wide Truth Commission
- Desire and importance of shared history

She stated that the listening sessions revealed a community ready to move forward, but on its own terms. The path ahead begins with internal truth-telling and healing. Only then can the Commonwealth and its Native peoples walk together toward justice,

accountability, and a shared future. She noted that the Steering Committee hasn't met since March 2025.

Elizabeth Solomon of the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag is interested in taking part in events on intertribal solidarity. She also requested a copy of the Report on Truth Commission Listening Sessions.

Darell Waldron, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Indian Council stated that he's happy to host the intertribal gathering if needed. The Rhode Island Indian Council has a community room to accommodate folks.

He announced that the Rhode Island Indian Council is hosting a Skills and Apprenticeship Fair on December 16th from 10:00am - 2:00pm at their facility. This is a great opportunity for the community to learn more about the programs they offer.

He also announced that the 45th Annual National Indian and Native American Employment and Training Conference (NINAETC) will be hosted by the Rhode Island Indian Council at the Omni Hotel in Providence, Rhode Island from December 8 until December 11, 2025. There will be over 400 Natives in attendance from across the state. He left his e-mail in the chat for those interested in more details.

Jean -Luc Pierite, President of the Board of Directors, NAICOB, relative to the listening sessions, mentioned that there was some outreach for NAICOB to hold a session but felt they didn't close on it and wonders if it can happen? Ms. Frederich responded that the session with NAICOB was held on May 29, 2024.

3. State Seal Advisory Commission - Education Committee

Comm. Anderson provided an update on the education component related to the state seal. As a member of the Advisory Commission, she emphasized that public outreach should have occurred prior to selecting a design for recommendation.

She noted that the historical origins of the current seal trace back to 7th and 8th century English traditions, highlighting that it is not American. Due to these concerns, the Advisory Commission (which is tasked with proposing a new seal, flag and mott), may need to revisit the nine final designs, and a re-vote may be necessary.

She stated that this topic will likely be discussed further at the next meeting of the Advisory Commission

Elizabeth Solomon, also a member of the Advisory Commission, mentioned that everyone who is Native was pushing to have it move forward with Native representation. When the final selection was announced, they were shocked. She emphasized that the educational component needed to come first, ensuring the public understood the context, history, and significance before any design decisions were made.

Akuahah Wheaton, Nipmuc, agrees that the educational component should have been introduced first. She noted that it's clear that the Special Commission relative to the seal and Motto of the Commonwealth (which was tasked with reviewing and recommending changes to the state seal and motto), never adhered to the fact that there shall be a Native on the flag. She informed us that in a memo, dated September 25, 2025 she notified members of the Advisory Commission, the Governor, the Joint Committee on State Administration & Regulatory Oversight, that the Special Commission and the current Advisory Commission neglected and violated MGL Chapter 2, where it states that "*there shall be an Indian on the Great Seal of MA*". Up to this point, the nine designs were selected unlawfully. She stated that all Massachusetts tribes and Native organizations have received an e-mail that explains everything and she has asked each of them to sign a memorandum and e-mail it to all the respective parties above. The memorandum supports a "stay and suspension" of the Advisory Commission from further proceeding unlawfully, until corrected. In closing she added that this isn't an opinion, it's the law.

Comm. Anderson acknowledged that while this might be the current law, laws can be amended. And added that if the Advisory Commission ultimately recommends a design that differs from the current seal, the Legislature will update the law accordingly.

4. MA 250 Commission

Jim reported that the Committee is making steady progress in its efforts to inspire Native groups to participate. The Mashpee Tribe is hosting an event, and activities are taking place each week across the region. Several tribal members expressed interest in participating and asked Jim to send more information.

5. Mass Cultural Council – Tribal Cultural Councils

Comm. Anderson reported that she has been selected by the Governor to serve on the Governing Board of the Mass. Cultural Council (MCC). She mentioned that Michael Bobbit, Executive Director of the MCC, has been an outstanding leader and a "super star" in his role. He will be leaving the agency at the beginning of January 2026 to take a position with OPERA American. She stated that Mr. Bobbit held several listening

sessions and advisory panels during which time he learned about the need to recognize tribal sovereignties. He responded by establishing several Tribal Cultural Councils to which Comm. Anderson remarked that he is someone who takes quick action. The ones that are currently active are Aquinnah Wampanoag Cultural Council, Nipmuc/k Cultural Council, and Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe Cultural Council. She added that the Mashpee (Mâseepee) Cultural Council will be up and running this fall. There are plans to have more intertribal cultural councils in the future.

6. Woodlands Partnership

Comm. Anderson stated that she has been working for four years with the Woodlands Partnership which is a legislatively state non-profit under sponsorship of New England Forestry. It covers 21 towns across western Franklin and northern Berkshire Counties. The Woodlands Partnership has involved local Indigenous people in its work and are seeking additional partnerships.

Comm. Anderson noted that she had previously represented the Ohketeau Cultural Center on the board. As she is no longer affiliated with them, she requested that the Commission allow for a seat for the Western Mass. Commissioner. She emphasized that the seat would be established both for the present and for the future, regardless of who holds the Western Mass. Commissioner role.

Comm. Anderson made a motion to allow for the Western Mass. Commissioner to have a seat on the Woodlands Partnership board.

Discussion ensued. There was an objection from a community member, so it was decided that more details are needed before a vote is taken.

Comm. Anderson stated that she will continue to serve on the Partnership board in her current capacity... as an Indigenous community member.

7. Proposed Legislation:

a. Legislative Recognition of Executive Order Tribes

Jim stated that under the Indian Arts & Crafts Acts (IACA) it requires that a State Recognized tribe be legislated. Current MA "State Recognized Tribes" have been designated by Governor's executive orders. Jim proposed that a legislative bill be presented to finalize the State recognition process. He feels that executive order recognition, given established criteria of history and genealogy with legislative confirmation, is a feasible process for future groups.

b. Indian Housing Authority on State's Affordable and low-income housing, enabling legislation

Jim reported that in the 1990s there had been proposed legislation to include an Indian Housing Authorities in in the State's housing enabling legislation. He noted that federally recognized tribes are eligible to receive HUD funding for housing construction on trust lands, but not in other areas.

He feels more discussion is needed to develop the concept and propose legislation to see what could happen. One opportunity might involve construction of twelve housing units at Freetown State Forest. (In 1939, a challenge was made against the taking of 200 acres of Watuppa land for Fall River's Reservoir. 200 Acres of the Freetown State Forest Land was designated as the Wampanoag Reservation and 12 units were included in the designation.) He stated that they will begin work on drafting legislation.

Elizabeth Solomon expressed opposition to drafting legislation at this time. She feels it would be inappropriate to proceed without input from the constituents the Commission represents. And stressed further that healing within the community is needed before moving forward.

8. Public Comments

Elizabeth Santana-Kiser, member of the Chaubunagungamaug Band of Nipmucks expressed concern regarding a letter she received stating that the tribe has not been active. She noted that this characterization was inaccurate and it dismisses all of the tribe's ongoing efforts. She emphasized that the late Loving One had dedicated many years fighting for state recognition for the tribe, underscoring the continuing efforts of the tribe. She added that they are an active body, their own tribe, and that Hassanamisco doesn't represent them.

Jose "Ite" Santana, a member of the Chaubunagungamaug Band of Nipmucks, stated that he has receive disturbing messages that Jim Peters said that their tribe was a Cultural Heritage organization and took exception to it. He reiterated that they are their own tribe and that Hassanamisco doesn't represent them.

Comm. Philips adjourned the meeting at 5:15 PM.

Submitted by Burne Stanley and Jim Peters